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## Seeking Meaning From a Grand Imam

A Top Sunni Cleric on the Use, and Misuse, of Islam

*By James Reston Jr.*

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### CAIRO

Nearly two weeks ago, Mohammed Sayed Tantawi, the grand imam of Egypt's al-Azhar mosque and the most widely respected and influential moral voice for Sunni Islam, sought to clarify for me the Islamic concepts of jihad, paradise and martyrdom. I had been struck by the widespread view in the United States that Islam seems to possess no ethical norms for armed struggle, so, before leaving for a 14-day visit to the Middle East, I asked Nabil Fahmy, the Egyptian ambassador in Washington, whether he could arrange an audience with the grand sheik. I wanted to clear up my own confusion over who -- if anyone -- speaks for Islam on the concepts that, in the aftermath of the attacks on the World Trade Center and the Pentagon, the suicide bombings by Palestinians and the murder of journalist Daniel Pearl, have driven so many Americans to view Islam as a violent religion.

Tantawi, it turns out, was the right person from whom to seek guidance. While the moral teachings of Islam rest in its law, known as *sharia*, there is no doctrine or orthodoxy for Islam, nor any human authority or hierarchy to interrupt the direct relationship between the believer and Allah. However, Sunni Muslims from Malaysia to the Middle East to Middle America, representing more than 80 percent of Islamic believers worldwide, look to al-Azhar and its Academy of Islamic Research (of which Tantawi is chairman) for learned interpretation and moral counsel.

Can it be, I wondered, that any Muslim, with a few followers, can walk into the street and proclaim a legitimate and authentic jihad against the West or Israel? Is it possible that any group of a few thousand fanatics can attack three huge American buildings, kill 3,000 unsuspecting innocents and validly say that the act is justified by the Koran?

In his vast office, decorated with lovely wood paneling carved with geometric Arabic designs and appointed with huge photographs of Islam's three holiest mosques, at Mecca, Medina and Jerusalem, the 73-year-old Tantawi spoke forcefully about the misconceptions in the West and, equally forcefully, of the perversions of Islam in the East that have led to the violence. A small man, with puffy eyes, deliberate speech and a gentle demeanor, he sat on his couch amid advisers and lesser imams, dressed in a simple red and white cap and a brown, floor-length caftan.

The concept of jihad, Tantawi affirmed through an interpreter, is purely defensive and cannot be aggressive. It can only legitimately be proclaimed by a head of state or leader

of all Arab peoples when Arab lands are invaded and occupied (in the manner 12th-century Islamic leader Saladin employed against the Crusader force of Richard I of England), or when great numbers of Arab peoples are displaced and exiled, or when the tenets of Islam are directly attacked or abused. Tantawi's explanation fit with the words I had read in the Koran and quoted back to him: "Fight in Allah's cause against those who wage war against you, but do not commit aggression, for verily Allah does not love aggressors."

Tantawi spoke out against the attacks in New York and Washington the day after they happened, saying that "killing civilians is a horrific, hideous act that no religion can condone." Now, the grand imam was eager for me to have his fuller, written statement on terrorism, which he had issued seven weeks after the attacks. This condemnation was largely overlooked in the American media -- it received only a brief mention in *The Post*, for example. It did not register with the American people, any more than did the condemnations of the chairman of the Supreme Judicial Council in Saudi Arabia; or of the Organization of the Islamic Conference (representing Muslims in 56 countries); or of the chairman of the Sunna and Sira Council in Qatar; or of the grand mufti of Saudi Arabia, also chairman of the senior ulema (the learned), who has, controversially, questioned suicide missions as a legitimate tool of the Arab struggle.

The imam's statement, which I took away to study later, distinguishes between jihad and the Koranic concept of *irhab*. In contrast to the defensive and obligatory nature of jihad, *irhab* is terrorism: unjust, aggressive violence against innocent and defenseless civilians that is expressly forbidden by Islamic law and Islamic principles. These rules forbid Muslims to kill innocent people -- and in particular, religious clerics of all faiths. They forbid killing the retreating enemy and those who surrender; they forbid harming captives; and they expressly forbid the destruction of buildings and civil centers.

All of this made clear to me how the continuing misuse of the word jihad, in the American media and elsewhere, perpetuates the myth that we have entered a "clash of civilizations" (to borrow Harvard professor Samuel Huntington's term). This misuse, repeated almost daily, is a gift to bin Laden, for such a formulation of East against West, Islam against Christianity, America against the Arab world, is what he wished to foment. Bin Laden may call his campaign jihad, but it is more precise to call it a crusade -- or even *irhab*.

Everywhere I traveled -- in Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates, Lebanon and Egypt -- bin Laden and his group were freely and frequently labeled as criminals. The al Qaeda leader, I heard time and again, cares nothing for the Palestinian cause, but only about himself and his place in history -- he's a classic megalomaniac.

Nor did bin Laden's perversion of Islamic principles find credence with the many people I spoke to. Tantawi scoffed when I read him the 1998 call to arms that bin Laden called his fatwa: "We . . . with God's help . . . call on every Muslim who believes in God and wishes to be rewarded to comply with God's order to kill Americans and plunder their money."

"Osama bin Laden is no specialist in religious affairs," the grand imam quipped, to the delight of the imams seated to his left. And then he added: "Islamic law banishes anyone who issues an untrue fatwa." About the references in the hijackers' documents that they were martyrs and would achieve paradise, Tantawi was equally contemptuous. "They are not martyrs but aggressors," he said. "They will not achieve paradise, but will receive severe punishment for their aggression." In Islam, he noted, there is an exact equivalent of Moses's commandment against killing. "Whoever shall kill a man or a believer without right," said the grand imam, "the punishment is hell forever. Allah will be angry with him and give him a great punishment." Especially ugly, Tantawi said, is the criminal who murders by surprise, "from the back," because "it is against morality and good honor."

There are of course two sides to the current confusion over religious beliefs between the West and Islam. On the one hand is the worry, widely acknowledged in the Persian Gulf region, that the Islamic world has not done a good job in separating the beliefs of the vast majority of the Arabs from the perversions of bin Ladenism. The most learned and prestigious imams of Sunni Islam are intently aware that a wrong understanding of the faith has taken hold in dangerous ways. When the prophet's name is appropriated by a so-called Army of Mohammed that murders an innocent journalist, or the sacred al Aqsa mosque in Jerusalem becomes the symbol for which teenagers kill themselves and murder innocent people, then the faith has strayed off course. A few weeks from now, a conference will be held at al-Azhar to reemphasize the essential core of the faith in the face of such "intrusive ideas."

But the other side of the coin is equally worrisome. In its fear and flag-waving and victimhood, the American people are not listening to such distinctions. Many Americans have projected onto all Arabs and all Muslims the view of bin Laden's aggressors. Unless this distinction, clear-cut in the Arab world, is more widely understood in the United States, we risk further violence based on misunderstanding. *James Reston Jr. is the author of "Warriors of God: Richard the Lionheart and Saladin in the Third Crusade" (Doubleday).*

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